

What We Are Spreading  
Rosh Hashanah 5770  
September 18, 2009  
Rabbi David Stern

Images of Jewish summer camp: swimming, mountain biking, sitting by the campfire, singing Shabbat songs as the sun begins to set.

Images of Jewish summer camp 2009: thermometers, Tamiflu, lines at the infirmary, and Purel, Purel, Purel.

This was the summer of the H1NI virus – never before has the word swine been spoken with such frequency at Jewish summer camps. Some camps delayed opening because of outbreaks among staff before campers even arrived; some closed down mid-session. Greene Family Camp, our terrific Reform movement camp south of Waco, dodged the bullet by acquiring and then administering a ten day dose of Tamiflu to all 600 children and adults on camp, and limiting the confirmed cases to about three.

As sobering school emails and reports of fatalities remind us, the epidemic is by no means over, and we should not take it lightly. More than one concerned physician has suggested that we try to limit the hugging and kissing at Temple on the High Holidays this year lest we become one big viral incubator. So if someone nods and smiles at you instead of kissing you on the cheek, or offers you an elbow instead of a handshake, it doesn't mean they are any less happy to see you. It just means they are wrestling with a serious Jewish values conflict – health vs. hugging.

This intersection of Jewish concern and medical concern is nothing new. It is imbedded in Jewish text, Jewish history, in countless jokes about the proud mothers of Jewish doctors.

It all begins with the core Jewish idea that both our bodies and our souls are God's creation, and therefore holy. Because our bodies belong to God, and are the vessels through which we carry out the mitzvot, we are charged to care for them. While some religious systems held that illness was an expression of divine will, and human attempts at healing therefore an act of hubris, Judaism has always asserted that life is God's greatest gift to us, and we have a religious mandate to preserve it.

Early rabbinic interpretations of the Torah assert not only the permission, but the obligation to heal. The Talmud prohibits Jews from living in a community in which there is no physician.<sup>1</sup> And responsibility for healing belonged not just to individual patients and doctors, but to society itself. Maimonides listed health care first on his list of the ten most important communal services that a city had to offer its residents,<sup>2</sup> and self-governing Jewish communities throughout history set up systems to ensure that all their citizens had access to health care.

In other words, health and healing have been on the Jewish agenda for a long time. All the more reason that we as American Jews should engage in our national conversation about health care, and advocate for effective change. Judaism is not a policy manual – it does not tell us which House or Senate Bill to favor or oppose. But it does establish a clear horizon of personal and social responsibility for creating communities where every individual has access to medical care.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin 66d.

<sup>2</sup> Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 4:23.

As the number of uninsured Americans continues to rise; as thousands of Americans die each year for lack of health care coverage; there can be no question that American society – as great as American medicine can be – stumbles far from that horizon of equal justice. In the language of our tradition, our health care system desperately needs *tikkun*, the repair that will bring greater wholeness to individual lives and to society.

How that repair will best be accomplished is a complex question, and my eyes and yours sometimes glaze over at the specifics of health care policy. But I do understand that Judaism sees our bodies as part of our essential dignity as human beings. And I do understand the imperative of our tradition to uphold that dignity. And I do understand that the prophets railed against the rulers who neglected the neediest members of society. Yes, the challenges to our policy makers are daunting. But as citizens in a democracy, shaped by our own stories of triumph and struggle, we share the responsibility to speak and to act with a sense of wisdom and moral urgency – to consider cost and benefit and conscience.

In his sermon tomorrow, Rabbi Knight will explore these questions in greater depth, and even more important, will explain how our Just Congregations initiative will provide our diverse Temple community with opportunity for honest discussion and meaningful action on issues of healthcare as we enter this new year. So stay tuned and check the Temple website for further information.

But for now, I'd like to turn your attention back to this ongoing season of swine flu, and to a vitally important Rosh Hashanah question it raises for us all: in this season of contagion, what am I spreading? Not with stubborn germs or clever microbes, but

with my own ethical and spiritual impact in the world? What am I spreading with my gossip? What am I spreading with my love? What am I spreading with my self-indulgence, or my generosity? With my embrace of Judaism, or my distance from it?

The Torah is no stranger to contagion – in the Book of Leviticus, a person with a communicable skin disease is quarantined outside the camp until he heals. But Rosh Hashanah beckons us towards a different epidemiology.

Our tradition teaches that during these ten days, the world is poised perfectly between good and evil, and each human act, each human breath, has the capacity to tilt the world in one direction or another. It is a radically empowering idea – and it can both inspire and intimidate us. It is the glory, and the responsibility, of our fundamental interconnectedness: to consider that we participate in an ineluctable chain of consequence – every word, every deed, every breath matters, and can matter for the good.

So on this day when we celebrate our great faith – that God gives us the capacity to transform ourselves and the world -- we ask a question of contagion: through my actions, my choices, my speech, my spending, my inevitable errors, my God-given strengths: what am I spreading?

It's a question of contagion, because we are more connected than we think. Modern researchers speak of social epidemics and tipping points, and chronicle how social networks cause clusters of people to buy one product or another, lose or gain weight, start or stop smoking, even to be happy or unhappy.

But we Jews were onto this idea a long time ago. The Book of Deuteronomy grants military exemption to those who would be afraid in battle, lest their fear be

contagious to their fellow soldiers – literally “lest his brother’s heart melt as his has.”<sup>3</sup>

As much as we respect our separate bodies, our tradition understands that we are connected by matters of emotion and spirit that transcend those physical boundaries all the time. Not just with the Biblical soldier’s fear or courage, but in the surge of excitement at a football game, in the shared tears or the clasped hands when a funeral or a wedding touches us, in the inspiration of Torah study or prayer, in the awed silence at the end of a great piece of theater or music.

The Psalmist sang that God formed us all with one heart,<sup>4</sup> and our experience tells us it is so. Created with a unique stamp but all in God’s image; not identical or homogeneous, but somehow deeply bound by that same divine spark: with responsibility towards one another, and a unique capacity to spread the heart’s work in the world.

Forty-one summers ago, on a humid July day at Soldier Field in Chicago, Eunice Kennedy Shriver walked to the microphone and convened the first Special Olympics Games. About one hundred spectators were present in a stadium that seats eighty-five thousand.

At those first games in Chicago, Eunice Shriver sent a fellow activist to Sears to buy her a \$10 bathing suit so she could jump into the pool with the athletes.<sup>5</sup>

She jumped into the pool, and today, more than three million Special Olympic athletes train year round in 181 countries, with events attended by hundreds of thousands of fans.

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 20:8. There is a beautiful discussion of this verse and the surrounding passage in Alan Lew, *This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, pp. 78-82.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 33:15.

<sup>5</sup> Description of the first Special Olympics based on Jack McCallum, “Small Steps, Great Strides,” *Sports Illustrated*, December 8, 2008.

She jumped into the pool, and we have the Americans with Disabilities Act.

She jumped into the pool, and made it possible for disabled people to walk and run and swim and volley and hurdle out of the closet of discrimination and shame.

She jumped into the pool, and Temple Emanu-El of Dallas has elevators to every floor, handicapped restrooms, lifts to the bima, sign language interpretation, CHAI residents as cherished members of our congregational family, our wonderful Lomdim program for students with learning differences -- and we still have a long way to go.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver jumped into the pool, and the ripples of blessing have continued to flow.

And Rosh Hashanah asks: What am I spreading?

This week in Dallas, we lost one of the great recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Norman Borlaug. A plant scientist, Dr. Borlaug bred high-yield crop varieties of wheat and rice that helped to avert mass famines across the world, dramatically increasing food production and saving up to a billion lives.

He grew up as a farm kid in rural Iowa during the Great Depression, shaped and angered by the hunger and suffering he saw around him. From that childhood, he became the scientist of whom the Nobel Committee said, "More than any other single person of this age, he has helped provide bread for a hungry world." Experts estimate that half the world's population will go to bed tonight having consumed grain descended from one of the varieties developed by Dr. Borlaug and his colleagues. Dr. Borlaug's work was focused on Latin American and Asia. So last week, he looked up from his deathbed and asked a colleague, "What about Africa?"

And Rosh Hashanah asks: What am I spreading?

The idea of contagion is important because it reminds us not only of our capacity to do good, but to affect and sustain each other – our children, our peers, our colleagues, our congregants. And it reminds us of the importance of being part of a community of purpose like Temple Emanu-El – a human community that will nurture and challenge us to stretch towards spreading greater goodness in the world.

When analysts look at epidemic social trends – from copycat crimes to fashion innovations, they talk about “permission givers” – people who by their actions create permission for other people to act similarly. The permission can be for something constructive, like drinking less or exercising more; or tragic, as when a celebrity suicide makes it permissible for others contemplating suicide to commit the act.

Permission is an especially important function of religious communities. When the secular world of materialism and consumption narrows our lives (sometimes without our even knowing it), we come here for a sense of permission to lift our sights beyond the latest brand or the newest restaurant.

Author Douglas Rushkoff writes of being mugged outside his apartment building in New York. When he returned to his apartment, he emailed the members of the neighborhood association to report the incident – when it happened and where. Within an hour, he received two emails in reply – not asking him how he was, but rebuking him for revealing the specific address of the incident, lest it depress property values in the neighborhood.<sup>6</sup>

When everyone is lined up to worship the latest golden calf – property values or business success or physical beauty or status -- we come here to be part of a community

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas Rushkoff, *Life Inc.*, p. xi.

that will help us spread notions of value that far transcend the bottom line in an annual report.

When Abraham bargains with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and asks that the city be spared for the sake of a number of the righteous, Abraham starts by asking that the city be spared if there are fifty righteous in it – and ultimately asks that it be spared for the sake of ten.<sup>7</sup> But he does not go lower than ten, as if to say that for the city to become whole again, some critical mass of decency will be necessary.

He knows that the pursuit of holiness requires a community of people who will be there to shore each other up, to support each other in doing the right thing, even when the right thing means paying attention to people as far away as Africa, or as close up and discomfoting as families who struggle with poverty just a matter of blocks from our own front doors. Even when the right thing means telling the truth about our neighborhoods and our own families. The work of justice and compassion can be lonely – we come here to support each other in that sacred enterprise. We come here so we don't have to do it alone.

In the work of sacred contagion, we may sometimes feel that we wish we could have done more. The truth is, examples like Eunice Shriver or Norman Borlaug can be daunting. Most of us will never feed a billion people. But remember the teaching of this day – that every act, every breath, every word has the capacity to tip the balance, not just the deeds that grab headlines and prizes.

Consider this: Among the events that will always mark this past year of financial turmoil is the Bernard Madoff scandal. It stung us as Jews for any number of reasons: the hundreds of millions of dollars of financial damage overall; the devastating harm to

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 18:22-32.

Jewish clients in particular; the fact that the crime was perpetrated by a supposedly pious Jew, in violation of Judaism's most central tenets of ethical dealings in the marketplace.

But perhaps worst of all is the idea that not only did Madoff violate the trust of individuals and the trust of pension and retirement funds, but he violated trust itself. Not only individuals and philanthropic foundations lie wounded, but trust itself lies wounded. In the wake of the scandal, we don't believe one another as readily. We hesitate and ask once and twice and ten times before entering into what used to be a handshake and an assurance. We've witnessed the rupture of *emunah*, the quality of faith and trust that Judaism teaches should be foremost in our business dealings – the same quality that the prophet Hosea uses to speak of fidelity in our marriages and in our relationship with God. The quality of trust that not only weaves together the fabric of business, but of human relationship and sacred community.

So *emunah* has been diminished on a global scale. And now we ask the Rosh Hashanah question: what will we spread in response? What trust will we restore to the world – in our marriages, in our relationships with our children and parents, in our communal and our business dealings?

Because Bernard Madoff is not going to restore trust to the world. And the truth is, neither the court that sentenced him nor the prison where he will live out his days will restore trust to the world either. The only answer is in what we will choose to spread – trust or cynicism, justice or deceit. That's what we can control. No, I don't think it will restore the endowment of my alma mater or yours – or make retirement funds bounce back before the market is ready – but each word, each deed, each breath that asserts trust and faithfulness in our lives, restores some measure of trust and faithfulness to creation.

It is non-scientific, counter-intuitive, and I believe deeply true: the best way to combat the evils that seem so huge and far off may be, in the words of the late Rabbi Alan Lew, “simply to take care of whatever is in front of our face.”<sup>8</sup> As simple as doing whatever good is in front of us to do – *b’ficha u’vilivavcha*, we will read on Yom Kippur – the good that is as close to us as our mouths and our hearts: to bring food where people are hungry, hope where people despair, medicine where people are sick, listening and laughter and song where people need it most. When it comes to epidemics of decency, it’s the little things that catch.

The key is to do it. While we pore over the analyses of health care legislation, we shouldn’t forget to make a little chicken soup for an elderly neighbor who is ill, or a friend who has suffered a loss. A mourner in the congregation said to me last year that lots of friends were well-meaning, but the ones who had been most helpful were not the ones who called and said, “I’m here if you need me. Let me know what I can do.” To this mourner, that felt like yet another responsibility to shoulder – it was now her job to figure out what the friend could do.

The most helpful people, she said, were the ones who just showed up at the door with the meals, or arranged for their housekeepers to come help during shiva, or emailed with a a specific invitation to lunch on a specific day at a specific restaurant, and understood if she said no. They just did the good that was in front of them to do.

And that is my utterly non-empirical life response to Bernie Madoff, to the need for women’s economic development in Africa, to the specter of a long-term war in Afghanistan, to the still uneasy economic ground beneath our feet: to do the good that is in front of us to do. I believe in policy, and I believe in politics, and I believe that

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<sup>8</sup> Lew, p. 255.

individual acts of benevolence are insufficient to change unjust social structures. But I also believe that those individual acts can add up. I believe it because the social-network researchers claim that one person's behavior patterns can influence the behavior of one thousand others. And I believe it because our tradition teaches us that one small act can tip the world towards good.

And so, a Jewish prescription for this flu season:

We should cough into our arms, wash our hands thoroughly, stay home from Temple on Shabbat if we have fever (and feel free to come if we don't.)

We should ask of ourselves, "What am I spreading," and answer that question with the great and simple deeds of our lives. To make the soup or the phone call. To offer a kind word because we can. To give tzedakah because we can. To do the good that is before us, and thereby tip the world's balance towards holiness.

And most of all, in this season of medical alert and spiritual awakening, to live each day with a contagious sense of embrace, our lives infectious with blessing. In a new year, we pray, of healing and hope for us all. Amen.